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Georgia

Brownville

BROWNVILLE, MORE PROSPEROUS OF ASPECT THAN the Negro communities usually fringing business and industry, spreads westward along the edge of Savannah. Though on its Currytown boundary it, too, contains the inevitable shacks in lanes, several of its streets, paved and tree shaded, are lined with good frame and brick houses which are occupied by the more well-to-do Negroes, among them teachers, doctors, lawyers, and business men. A substantial school building and the Charity Hospital speak of advanced social consciousness.

On Bismark Street is found the House of Prayer, one of the many churches established throughout the country by Bishop Grace. Here several times each year the leader visits his congregation, and the day on which "Daddy Grace" * [16] returns to his flock is always a gala occasion. Regular members and visitors from outlying districts crowd the heavy lumber benches of the House of Prayer. The air is tense with excitement. Above the confusion can be heard the strident but rhythmic beat of drums.[33] Bright splashes of color are given by the crepe paper decorations and the vividly contrasting military costumes of members of the church organizations, among which are the Lilies of the Valley, the Queens, the Royal Guards, the Silver Leaf Band, the Transportation Committee, Male Ushers No. 1, Male Ushers No. 2, and the Sons and Daughters of the Prophet. Others in the

* *Though the meetings of Bishop Grace are common to many parts of the United States, it was thought well to include an accurate description of the House of Prayer as it was found in this community.*

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794 congregation don their newest and most colorful garments.
(792) Preparation has been made for all emergencies. In attendance are burly guards whose duty it is to see that nothing occurs to disturb the smooth performance of the ceremonies. The floor has been thickly sprinkled with sawdust and the stout posts at the front of the church are padded to prevent injury to overzealous worshipers.

794 At the sudden sharp sound of a whistle all activity ceases;
793 there is silence in the church. The Armor Bearers leave the
796 building to escort the Bishop to his seat of honor. Soon they return, followed by the Queen who is arrayed in a pale green satin evening dress over which is worn a black velvet cape lined with scarlet. A double line of uniformed guards follows, and marching proudly between the lines is the Bishop. According to his own statement, the Holy Prophet, as his followers call him, is of Portuguese birth. His long dark hair which falls to his shoulders, his piercing eyes, his pointed beard, and sideburns all combine to give him a distinguished and unusual appearance.*

The procession continues to the front of the church, where, with much ceremony, the Bishop seats himself upon a lofty throne set far back on the spacious platform. The

** Details of the early life of "Daddy Grace" are clothed in obscurity and little can be learned of the real origin of the House of Prayer. Some claim that he is of West Indian birth, others that he was born Marcilino Manuel Garcia in Portugal, and still others interpret his references to " a land beyond the sea" as indication that he hails from Egypt. All members of the cult must be baptized and during a four-week session in 1936 1,789 candidates were ministered to at a charge of $1.00 each. The Bishop advocates that members give generously of their material goods to the church and he has been known on occasions to go about among his congregation seizing purses and demanding that worshipers sacrifice treasured jewelry. It is a well known fact that his profession of "spiritual leader" has proved a vastly profitable one, and in the course of the last several years he has amassed a huge fortune. Many of "Daddy's" enterprises are looked upon with disfavor and suspicion by the police department. His frequent clashes with the law over various matters of an extremely worldly nature serve only to increase the attendance and the collections at the church and also give the Bishop much desired publicity. Followers are unimpressed by his occasional arrests, secure in the knowledge that no earthly force can ever conquer "Daddy." See* Time *(New York), March 7, 1938, XXXI, No. 10, p. 30.*

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Sunbury

123 OUR CAR CAME TO AN ABRUPT STOP IN THE SANDY road before the board fence which enclosed a small group of weather-beaten clapboard houses. We called to a young Negro girl who lounged in a doorway and she came forward to see what we wanted. Almost simultaneously there appeared from the other houses scattered about the clearing a number of other persons.

Two women about thirty-five years old and nine or ten small children all approached the fence. At first they were rather wary, but their attitude gradually turned to friendliness and they hung over the high board fence, talking and laughing in great good humor. Elizabeth Roberts,* the (115) young girl whom we had first seen, appeared to be the leader of the group.

795 We were interested to know if these people had river baptisms any more. "Duh Sunbury Baptis Church an duh Palmyra Baptis Church both hab baptizins," Elizabeth told us. "Cose it depend on how many folks wants tuh leab duh Presbyterian Church an jine duh Baptis. Mos ub us is already baptize."

"Where do they hold the baptisms?" we inquired.

The group all pointed in the direction of the river. "Right obuh deah in duh Sunbury Ribbuh," they chorused.

(796) Elizabeth again took the initiative. "All duh candidates
(292) is robed in wite," she explained. "Duh preachuh come frum

* *Elizabeth Roberts, Sunbury.*

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795 Savannah an he is dressed in a long robe. He walk long an
796 duh folks all mahch behine im. Dey goes down tuh duh rib-
• (292) buh an sing as dey go. Dey alluz hab duh baptizin wen duh
(783) tide is goin out so duh watuh will wash duh sins away. Attuh
dey all gits tuh duh ribbuh, dey stop an duh preachuh ast duh candidates tuh step fawwud. One by one he dip em in duh watuh an dey is buried in baptism. Wen dey is all baptize, duh preachuh pray tuh duh ribbuh an [63] ast dat all sins be taken away. Den all duh folks sing an shout an praise duh Lawd."

The little group leaning on the railing nodded in agreement and as if in memory of the ceremony their bodies swayed rhythmically. As we listened and watched we could almost see the white robed procession winding to the river bank; we could almost hear the chanting of the converts as their sins were washed away.

764 The conversation turned to burial customs in the section and the women told us that "settin-ups" were still held for those who died.

"We all sit wid duh body an sing an pray an keep duh spirit company," said one of them.

Another added, "At duh fewnul we sing an we puts our (777) hands on duh cawpse tuh say goodbye. It bad luck not tuh do dis." [31]

We had heard in other communities that in case of death away from home the body is brought back to its native town for burial. This custom is also prevalent in Sunbury, we learned.

"Ebrybody wannuh be buried in deah own town," [1] Elizabeth said. "An we nebuh bury strainjuhs wid our own folks. (609) Ef a strainjuh die yuh, we bury em in duh strainjuh's lot." [8]

795 Emma Stevens,* tall and slim, a baby in her arms and several small children gathered about her, spoke up, "Yuh got

* *Emma Stevens, Sunbury.*

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hollowed-out log set on legs served as a watering trough for the ox.

Susan told us about the death of her mother, Rachel La Conte, who had come from Liberty County. "She die right in dis house. Dey measure uh wid a string. Dey beat duh drum tuh tell ebrybody bout duh settin-up.[26] We all set up wid duh body. We hab a big wash pot full uh coffee an hab a big sack uh soda crackuh fuh duh folks.[27a, c] Ebrybody place dey han bery light on uh eahs an on uh nose an den dey say, 'Dohn call me. I ain ready fuh tuh go yit.'[30, 31]

"We bury uh by tawch light attuh dahk. Ebrybody mahch roun duh grabe in a succle. Ebry night attuh duh fewnul I put food on duh poach fuh duh spirit tuh come git it.[56, 58]

"In duh ole days dey beat duh drum tuh call duh people tuh duh fewnul.[24] Dey beat it slow—boom—boom—boom. Wen dey wannuh stuhrup duh folks fuh a dance aw frolic, dey beats duh drum fas. Den dey knows it ain fuh no fewnul an dat it's fuh a good time. Duh people neahby, wen dey heahs it, beats deah drum an das how dey sends a message so udduh folks gits it.[26]

"I kin membuh two kine uh drum. Deah wuz duh lill kittle drum. Hit wuz bout fifteen inches cross an tree an a half foot high. Dat wuz duh drum dey beat fuh a settin-up."

Susan, too, gave us a description of the river baptisms. "Dey baptize in duh watuh down at duh landin. All duh candidates is dressed in wite. Dey all confess deah sins an say dey want tuh be save.

"We all mahch long in a line an sing an pray. Wen we git tuh duh ribbuh bank, we stop an duh preachuh say a long prayuh tuh duh Lawd. Den duh preachuh take duh candidates one by one and dey go down in duh ribbuh. Duh preachuh he say a prayuh tuh duh ribbuh. Dey alluz bap-

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SAPELO ISLAND

829 "Doze folks could fly too. Dey tell me deah's a lot ub um
789 wut wuz bring heah an dey ain much good. Duh massuh
wuz fixin tuh tie um up tuh whip um. Dey say, 'Massuh,
567 yuh ain gwine lick me,' an wid dat dey runs down tuh duh
ribbuh. Duh obuhseeuh he sho tought he ketch um wen dey
git tuh duh ribbuh. But fo he could git tuh um, dey riz up
in duh eah an fly way. Dey fly right back tuh Africa. I
tink dat happen on Butler Ilun.

825 "I use tuh heah lots ub animal stories, but it bin so long
I mos fuhgit bout um. I ain heah much bout duh spiduh
cep he is bery wicked an he shahp. He kin spin he tread an
riz right up in duh eah widout nuttn tuh hep um. He see a
fly an begin tuh spin roun an roun um till he ketch um in he
web. Den he caahn git way an An Nancy got um. Das wut
duh chillun say tuh dis day wen dey see a spiduh ketch a fly
—An Nancy got um.' " [A]

346 On Sunday evening Julius drove us through black swamp
and bush to the church at Silver Bluff (Plate XVIII). The
little white frame building with yellow light from oil lamps
shining through the windows made the night suddenly come
794 alive. Negro men and boys were moving about outside in the
darkness and a few were gathered on the steps. All the
women and children were inside.

Escorted by Julius and a deacon we went into the church
and took our places on the second from the front middle
bench. The pulpit stood on the raised platform on which most
of the light was concentrated. The men and boys came in.
The church was filled with a tense quietness.

793 The preacher came from behind the platform and stood
794 silently behind the pulpit desk, looking dramatically over
his congregation. He was tall and spare, with brown skin,
narrow face, and a thin pointed beard, a Mohammedan look-
• (292) ing Negro. He wore a black skull cap, which we learned
later was not ritualistic but was worn to protect his head

A, [See Category 346, plate following p. xxxii-X--Analyst]

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793 from the draught. This was Preacher Little who, we were
794 afterwards told, was an itinerant preacher, not a native to
(792) the island but a type native to the district.

His text, read in a loud, commanding voice, was "You ah
796 the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its savory, where-
537 with shall it be salt; it is then no good and should be trompled intuh earth." The exposition of this pronouncement was awaited with breathless interest.

The sermon that followed, however, was in no way connected with the text. Preacher Little divided his sermon into three parts and lectured his congregation on "straying frum duh paat." What he said was not really coherent. Words stood out, phrases rang in our ears, quotations from the Bible resounded at random but that was the beginning and the end. The impelling element was the sound of Preacher Little's voice.

796 In each part he began slowly, quietly, persuading and rea-
786 soning with his congregation. His voice would carry a pleading question to them and they would answer, "Huh."[29] As he progressed, the quiet reasoning diminished; he shouted to his listeners. The "Huh—Huh's" became loud, guttural, vibrating grunts that echoed through the little building. Regular stamping of the feet began; the vibration penetrated into every corner. It was impossible not to think of the beating of the drum. The regular rhythmic, swelling noise was deafening. It meant agreement with Preacher Little. It urged him on to greater heights until his shouting voice not only seemed to fill the church but to reverberate from wall to wall. This climax was reached three times, at the end of each of the three parts of the sermon. Each time it seemed to act as a great emotional purge to the listeners and leave them happily exhausted.

796 When the sermon ended, spirituals were sung under the
533 able direction of a young Negro named George Smith.* The

* *George Smith, Sapelo Island and Brunswick.*

4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

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.292

4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

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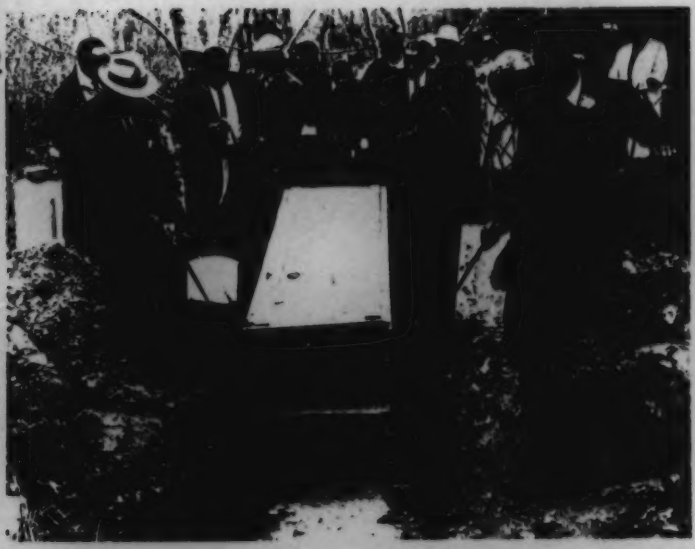

764

4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

Rev. James Grant

GET ON YOUR HOLY HORSE

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796

Be careful, my friends, because sometimes the
Chairman of Hell begin to saddle up his pony.
He gonna override somebody.
You walk down the road
And somehow your feet begin to be tangled.
The road become rocky, hard to cross.

Hallelujah, my friends,
Put on your travelin' shoes.
Get on your holy horse
Because sin are now pressing hard,
Many dangers follow.

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4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
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11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)
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St. Helena Island

248 175 (657) men, for the young men were still away in the army or at work in the camps for "cash money." Across the road the cotton was scarcely up, struggling bravely against wild phlox and grass, a picturesque battle bearing witness that the owner would beg for Government rations in the winter and perhaps stand by and see his land sold for taxes a few years later.

794 175 The freedmen, some of them now making their second crop on their own little "plantations," were on their way to "Brick Church" to hear "old Massa Richard,"[1] who had preached to them before "big gun shoot," speak in the open under the moss-hung live oaks. They crowded (492) (493) the road, a gaily-dressed throng of black folk, some on foot, some on horseback, some in wagons, others in the rude ox cart of plantation days, some even in northern trotting buggies drawn by Government-condemned horses which the proud owners had bought for perhaps as much as $300 cash. They were a colorful sight in their gaudy (292) calicoes and crinolines. The younger women wore straw bonnets, stays, and cotton gloves, but the grannies clung to their many-colored handkerchiefs and their loose gowns cut after the fashion of slavery days.

Their loud laughter and gay chatter rang out as they passed through the gates which in plantation days had made a private road to the church. As a buggy containing a group of white teachers and superintendents approached, those on foot stopped and drew aside, out of respect, to let the vehicle pass. The old women gave the white party a droll bob of the head, the young ones made

794 576 175

[1] The Reverend Richard Fuller, former pastor of "Brick Church" and owner of a plantation on St. Helena Island.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)
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175 464 who owned and operated plantations and drew their labor from the Island.

175 511 Despite the fact that the majority of the inhabitants of St. Helena never made more than enough to carry them through the year, there were some who prospered. At [342] the close of the Reconstruction period, small two-story houses with porches, window panes, and a neat coat of paint had begun to appear.[21] There were some who still [492] rode to church, as in the days just after the war, in [493] northern buggies drawn by trotting horses, and poverty-• [292] stricken, indeed, was the man who did not have a Sunday suit.

175 731 Just as St. Helena was beginning again to be a little prosperous, the disastrous storm of 1893 in a day and night of fearful wind and rain spread destruction everywhere. The crops had not been so promising in many years, but the tidal wave which swept over the Island in August destroyed the greater part of them. Houses were carried away and there was scarcely a family which did not suffer the loss of some member. Juliana, nurse in the family of James Ross Macdonald, white landowner and part owner of the chief store of the Island, described the storm to her mistress who was away at the time:

> My fren,' the win' blow dat day fer true, but I ain't t'ink much about um, fer I see de win' blow nuff times in ma life. 'Bout four o'clock Sunday evenin' I lock de do' an' walk to Cousin Richard's house. . . . De house ben full ob people, an' I just get dere in time fer de win' bruck a-loose fer true, an' make sich a noise an' rock de house so, eberybody start to cry an' pray one time. Well, sir! 'stead ob growin' better he grow wuss, an' bime-bye de wing

[21] Benjamin, "The Sea Islands," *Harper's Monthly*, LVII, 858.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
St. Helena Island

When a person wished to become a member of the church, he must go into seclusion for two or three weeks until he had received a vision that his sins had been forgiven. During this time of seclusion, he was said to be "seeking." Upon the genuineness of his vision the praise leader must pass judgment. Then the candidate must go through the catechism, thoroughly memorizing every sentence, and pass two examinations in the praise house and one in the church before being admitted to baptism. Once admitted, he wore the head cloth of the candidate until the day of baptism which was usually on communion Sunday. Dressed in white robes, the candidates came to the river at high tide to receive the ordinance of baptism. Miss Towne described a baptism in January, 1876, as being lengthy but impressive. Before communion, which preceded the baptismal service, the minister told the church members "that they were not to take a long drink of wine, but a sip only—that he had been told that 'some of they said they meant to get their two cents' worth.' (That is the amount generally subscribed by each to buy the wine.) He told them that was very naughty conduct in church members." The elders, Miss Towne explained, "used to take the first filled cup, throw back their heads, and drain it with gusto. That was their idea of partaking of the Lord's Supper." Communion over, the members filed outside to the river bank and amid prayer and song the candidates were immersed.

As in slavery days, the praise leaders attempted to regulate the affairs of the praise members, so in freedom the officers of the praise houses and the churches sought to regulate all the private and public disputes arising on